DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 098 EA 032 228

AUTHOR	Digitale, Robert
TITLE	911! A Manual for Schools and the Media during a Campus Crisis.
INSTITUTION	California School Boards Association, Sacramento.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	33p.
AVAILABLE FROM	California School Boards Association, 3100 Beacon Blvd., West Sacramento, CA 95691 ($10.95). Tel: 800-266-3382 (Toll Free); Fax: 916-371-3407; Web site: http://www.csba.org.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	Communications; *Cooperative Planning; *Crisis Management; Elementary Secondary Education; Emergency Programs; *Institutional Advancement; Mass Media Role; News Media; Organizational Communication; Police Action; Police School Relationship; Public Relations; School Community Relationship; *School Security
IDENTIFIERS	*California; Media Management; Media Relations

ABSTRACT

School district communications planning rarely includes ways to work with the media during an emergency. This short guide is aimed at providing both school officials and media professionals with specific perspectives and recommendations for cooperating to deliver crucial information to parents and the community during a crisis on campus. The purpose of the guide is to assist school districts and the media in collaborative planning for a crisis such as a shooting, natural disaster, or other event requiring the attention of law enforcement. The guide touches on the following topics: (1) why it is important to plan for a crisis; (2) the needs of schools and the media; (3) who should be included in crisis communication planning; (4) what should be included in a crisis communication plan; (5) what to do when a crisis occurs; (6) legal interpretations regarding media access to school campuses; and (7) the role of law enforcement. The guide includes a resource information list and several checklists. (WFA)

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911! A Manual for Schools and the Media During a Campus Crisis.

California School Boards Association

2001

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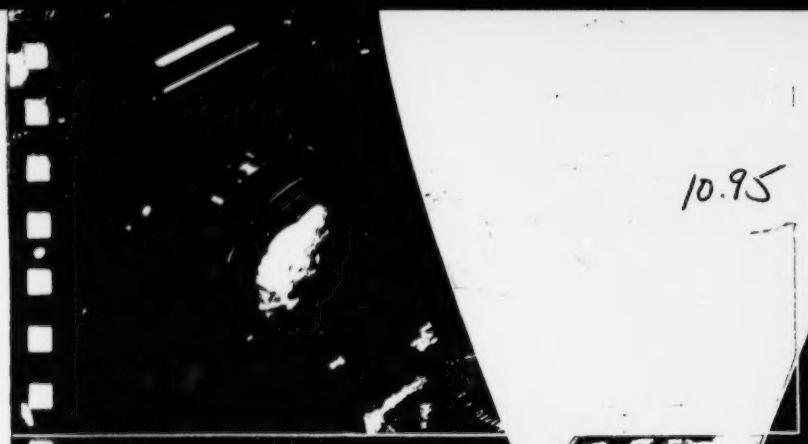

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911!

A **manual** for **schools** and the **media** during a **campus crisis**

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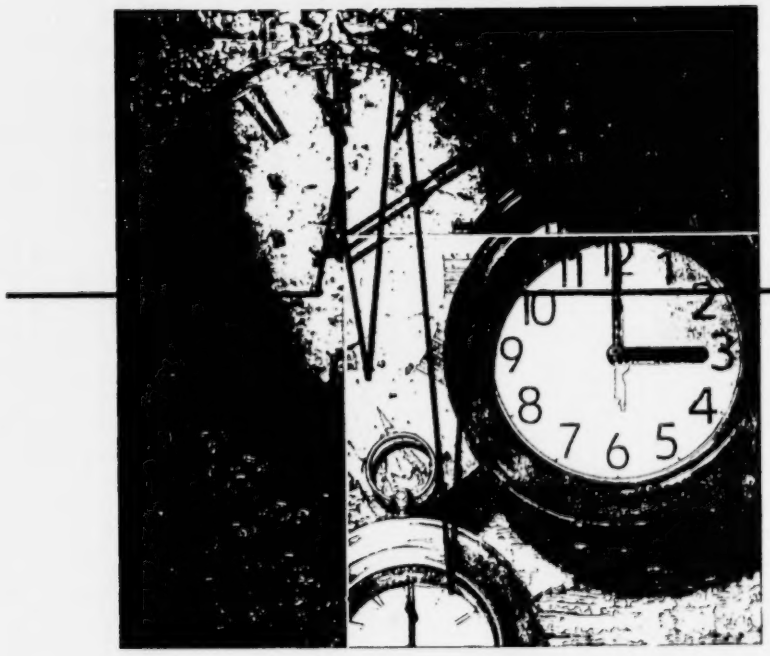

"Information is important. Accuracy is essential!"

— Ed Pyle

Executive News Producer, KNX-AM
Los Angeles

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OVERVIEW & BACKGROUND

In 1999, CSBA held a media briefing for the Capitol Press Corps and education news reporters to address the issues of school safety and crisis communications. CSBA also released to the press the second edition of its School Safety Handbook. The media briefing was the foundation for the development of a CSBA Schools and Media Crisis Communications Task Force. The task force would assist school districts and the media to engage in open, candid dialogue about planning for a crisis at a school to meet the needs and concerns of all parties involved.

School district crisis communications planning rarely includes what should be a major element in handling a crisis — how to effectively work with news media that cover the emergency. This resource guide is aimed at providing school officials and the media with specific perspectives and recommendations for working with the news media to deliver crucial information about the crisis to parents and the community.

The intent of the task force, and the specific purpose of this guide, is to assist school districts and the media in collaborative planning for a crisis, such as a shooting, natural disaster, or other significant incident requiring the attention of law enforcement.

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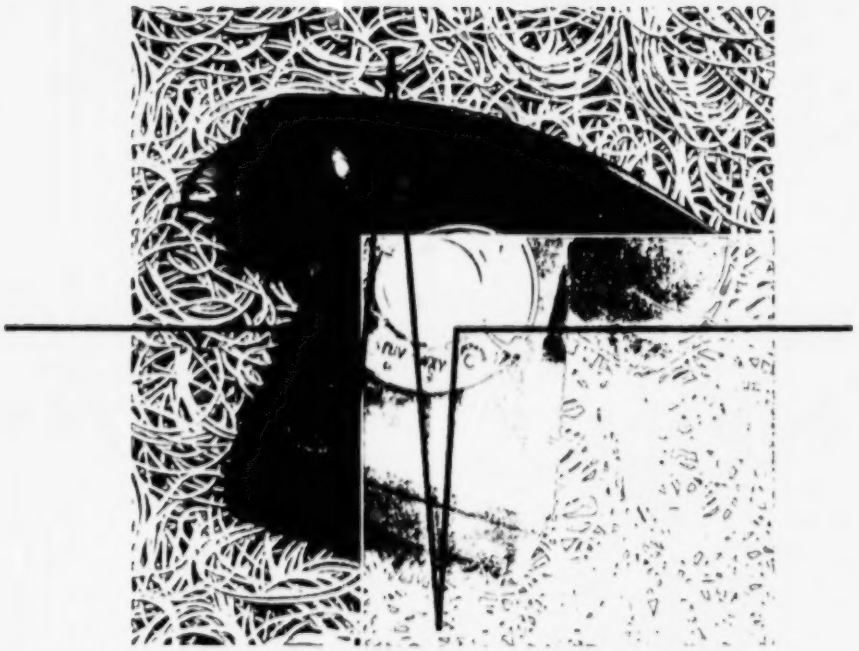

"The media can assist you in informing parents and the community as to the safety of our students."

— Cindy Marks
CSBA Delegate, Region 8
Board Member, Modesto City SD

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WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO PLAN FOR A CRISIS

Planning ahead is the best way to meet the pressures and complexities of a crisis at a school site. Most of the time, crisis planning rightly deals with the safety of students and staff in an emergency, including how parents will be notified about a crisis on campus. Many schools also plan ahead to work with law enforcement and local emergency officials when something goes wrong.

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- Law enforcement personnel and news media representatives quickly become factors in the emergency, requiring the attention of school personnel.

- In a crisis, law enforcement depends on school officials to provide quick information about the campus and the students. Law enforcement and other public safety personnel are then able to operate independently to perform public safety duties.

KEY THOUGHTS: The timely release of information by schools and the news media makes their responsibilities entirely compatible. Working with the news media in a manner which helps both understand the other's needs and expectations before and during a crisis is a major element in the successful planning and handling of an emergency situation.

"In the event of a crisis, it's important to communicate with the media. They are going to get the story one way or another. It's best to work together so that the story is an accurate reflection of the situation."

— Jeanette Billingsly
CSBA Delegate, Region 6
Board Member, Elk Grove USD

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THE NEEDS OF SCHOOLS AND NEWS MEDIA DURING A CRISIS

Mutual Compatibility: Schools' needs and their responsibilities to students and parents and the media's need for information really are compatible. Schools have a responsibility to release timely, accurate information about a crisis or emergency to parents and the community. The news media's responsibility in a crisis is securing as much relevant information as possible, and getting the news out as quickly and accurately as possible to the public.

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What are the needs of schools during a crisis?:

- Assure the safety of students and staff.
- Implement a school emergency plan to safely evacuate students and staff from the school site to a predetermined gathering location.
- Have a school spokesperson available and informed.
- Furnish accurate information on the crisis or emergency.
- Maintain confidentiality of student and employee information, as required by law.
- Notify parents and guardians using an accurate student attendance list for that day.
- Cooperate and coordinate with law enforcement personnel.

"Schools and the news media tackled some tough issues! Together we developed a comprehensive 911 resource guide focused on our most important priority — the safety of our students."

— Mina Fasulo
Assistant Executive Director, Communications
California School Boards Association
Sacramento

What are the needs of news media during a crisis?:

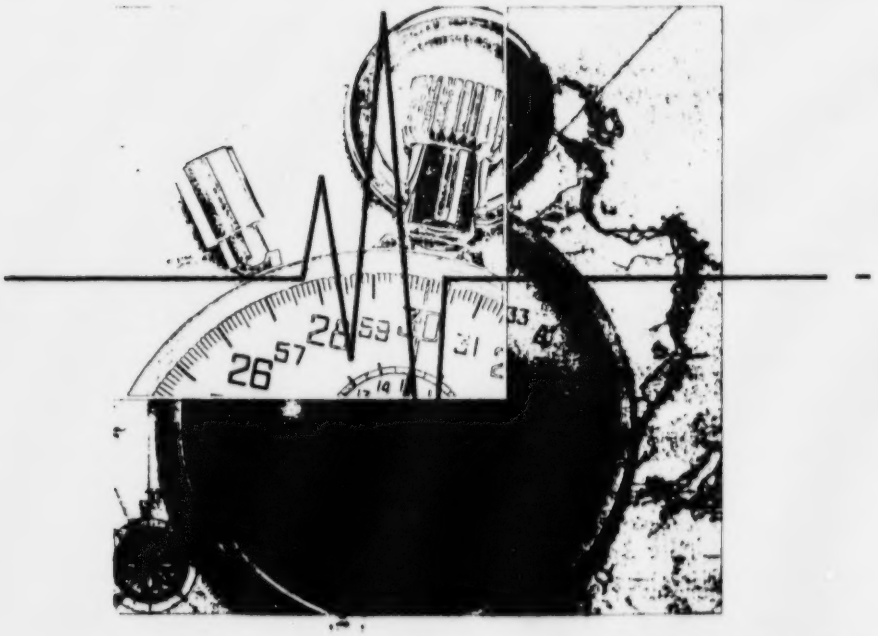
- To report as much information as quickly as possible.
- To receive a constant flow of information to accurately report the story.
- To depend on school officials, law enforcement representatives, eyewitnesses and others involved in the crisis to furnish as much confirmed information as possible.
- Furnish an updated layout of school campus buildings and facilities.
- Provide background information on the school site.

"Information is assurance."

— Greg Lefevre
Bureau Chief, CNN America, Inc.
San Francisco

When print, radio and television reporters converge on a crisis scene, certain logistics arise from such coverage that affect the accurate flow of information and pictures to the news media.

- **Release of timely, accurate information is easier if a school representative is designated beforehand to deliver information to the news media.** This also makes it more likely that all reporters get the same information and are treated fairly. In a major crisis event, more than one spokesperson may be necessary to handle the number of reporters. The identified school representative, if possible, should be someone other than the school principal. Other school representatives may be more appropriate and be more available to provide information to the news media.



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- **Confirmation of information before it is released.** Reporters will rely on officials to provide accurate information, understanding that crises are dynamic, fluid situations that rapidly change.
- **Reporters need a place to work.** Setting aside a media area or news center as close to the scene as is practical makes everyone's job easier so reporters can depend on getting their information from the same location. With the media in one place, it is easier for school officials and law enforcement personnel to control the situation. The identified space should also accommodate video and audio equipment along with microwave and satellite trucks.
- **Print and television news organizations must have pictures.** Within reason and with the cooperation of law enforcement representatives, still and video camera operators will want as many pictures as possible to tell their stories.

"In the event of a school crisis, the media are not the enemy. The guy on the playground with the gun is the enemy."

— Lee Swanson
Executive Producer, KGTV-TV
San Diego

- **Camera coverage can be pooled — if necessary.** If the crisis area of the school campus has been sealed off by law enforcement and it's impossible to give all cameras access, make arrangements for pool coverage. The media will organize and select one representative still camera and one representative video camera to be taken into the crisis area. It's also common practice for the media to select a representative reporter to accompany the cameras and report back to all other reporters. Pool cameras and the reporter are then obligated to share their film, videotape and information with all other news organizations.

- **More than one reporter from the same news organization may cover major crisis events.** Each reporter will want his/her own information and sources. Therefore, school officials should ensure that information is made available to each reporter.

KEY THOUGHTS: Reporters will report on the crisis with or without the cooperation of school officials. It's in the school's interest, and the interest of the parents and the community to cooperate with the news media. Make sure the information and perspectives reported on the crisis or emergency are accurate and complete.

"Simply gaining an understanding of the needs, expectations and perspectives of both schools and the media will go a long way in developing a practical, yet useful, crisis communications plan."

— James Morante
Public Information Officer
California School Boards Association
Sacramento

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BEFORE THE CRISIS HAPPENS

Understanding the media's needs is the first step in developing a crisis communications plan. To implement a plan effectively, it's the responsibility of the school district to initiate face-to-face interaction with local media and law enforcement officials before a crisis. Advance planning assists school officials to identify strengths and weaknesses within the plan, and ensures that all parties involved are communicating well as the plan develops.

Although many of California's more than 1,000 school districts and county offices of education do not have public information officers or any communications staff, several steps should be taken to develop and implement a crisis communications plan before a crisis occurs, including:

- ❒ Produce a draft plan that reflects the school district's roles and needs
- ❒ Meet with local media and law enforcement on a regular basis to discuss their roles and needs
- ❒ Designate a school spokesperson who is capable of speaking clearly and concisely during stressful situations
- ❒ Maintain a current school profile (see profile template in reference section)
- ❒ Finalize and maintain an emergency plan with appropriate school personnel
- ❒ Inform all school personnel of the plan
- ❒ Review, update and test the plan periodically

For a more comprehensive crisis communications plan checklist, see page 29.

Several aspects of the plan, including student safety procedures or where the media staging area should be located at the school, should be made with law enforcement officials and media representatives.

Get the word out! It's important that everyone is informed about the crisis communications plan. A successful response to a crisis requires understanding and involvement by many individuals.

Many districts across the state coordinate "mock crisis" drills with local law enforcement. The media should be informed of the details of the drill and when the drill will take place. These drills familiarize school officials with the crisis process, and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the communications plan.

Emergency telephone trees are an effective way to disseminate information to district and county office staff. However, periodic testing of contact numbers is needed to ensure that the tree is accurate and useful.

KEY THOUGHTS: A crisis communications plan simply outlines the roles, responsibilities and duties of school officials in case of an emergency. The extent of detail within the plan will vary from district to district, depending on the amount staffing and resources. But even a basic plan that is tested periodically will familiarize staff with emergency procedures and minimize the chance of overlooking critical elements during a crisis.

"Talk to your local reporters when things are calm and you'll learn that reporters generally are not ogres, but simply people doing their job of informing the public."

— Jennifer Kerr
Reporter, The Associated Press
Sacramento Bureau

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"Pictures and sound.
Pictures and sound."

- On the needs of television media

— Ken Wayne
Reporter, KTVU-TV
Oakland

WHEN THE CRISIS HITS

When a crisis occurs, it's too late to develop a plan. Within minutes of an emergency or critical incident, local and possibly national news media may arrive on the scene, and school officials will be under pressure to make several important decisions quickly. With preparation and practice, school staff will know their roles and responsibilities.

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The news media will arrive quickly and will expect cooperation from school officials. The media will be seeking timely information about the crisis that can be reported immediately. Reporters are on constant deadlines. News is a 24-hour operation, with coverage often at 15-minute intervals.

Above all, the safety of students should remain the highest priority.

Crisis Communications Checklist:

- ❒ STAY CALM
- ❒ Contact law enforcement
- ❒ Contact appropriate school officials, including school board members (use telephone tree)
- ❒ Collect all factual information
- ❒ Provide factual information to appropriate school officials
- ❒ Notify all other school employees
- ❒ Contact students' families
- ❒ Work with law enforcement to ensure a safe and workable media staging area
- ❒ Provide current, verified information updates to media at regular intervals

When speaking with the media:
Be concise and factual. The media can quickly disseminate important information to parents and the community. However, rumors, suspicions or unverified information could worsen an already tense situation.

Don't hesitate to say "I don't know." If certain facts and specific information on the crisis are unavailable, say so and tell the reporter(s) you will check on it and get back to them as soon as possible, and follow through.

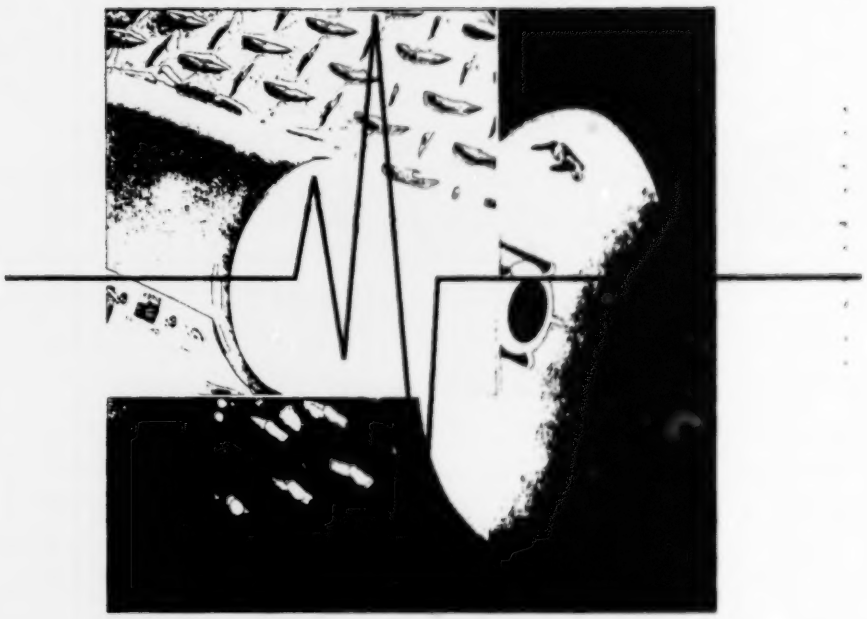
Be straightforward in providing information. Do not cover up bad news or delay in reporting negative news about the crisis. If the media feel news is being held back or manipulated, they will seek information elsewhere, perhaps from sources who may not be fully informed about the crisis.

It's important that information is disseminated to appropriate school officials as it becomes verified — ensuring a consistent message is being delivered to the media. Conflicting information or messages will only hurt the credibility of the spokesperson(s) and may create confusion and misinformation.

Plan for and be prepared for live radio and television interviews. Television, and to a lesser extent radio, will conduct frequent live interviews on the crisis. Spokesperson(s) should be available throughout the day, if needed. Also make sure information used in a live interview is verified and accurate.

"Being prepared in advance and establishing ongoing media relations can only help schools react in the most effective way when a crisis occurs."

— Jan Zilli
CSBA Director, Region 11
Board Member, Orcutt Union ESD



"The issue of media access to public schools isn't going to go away, especially during a crisis. Planning and preparation will go a long way in bridging and understanding those needs."

— Robert Digitale

Writer, Santa Rosa Press Democrat

LEGAL PERSPECTIVES ON CAMPUS ACCESS

DAY-TO-DAY vs. CRISIS SITUATIONS

There are different points of view on what the Penal Code and a state Attorney General's opinion say about access to school campuses, particularly by the news media. Although many school officials and media representatives may disagree on the extent of campus access under normal coverage circumstances, there is less likely to be disagreement on the news media's right of access during a crisis or emergency.

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- Understanding why there are differing points of view on the law is important for school personnel, board members, district and school administrators and teachers. California Penal Code, Section 627 - 627.10 and the 1996 California Attorney General's opinion on allowable restrictions to campus access by the news media are the legal guidance.

- News media organizations believe the law gives the news media access to school campuses with few restrictions.

- School officials believe the law gives district and school officials discretion in limiting the media's right to campus access.

KEY THOUGHTS: Face-to-face meetings with local school, media and law enforcement officials can lead to a workable, realistic understanding about the news media's right and school's rights to campus access, particularly during a crisis.

"Many potentially difficult situations with the media can be alleviated through cooperative planning efforts in which both the media and school officials can develop an understanding of each other's roles and needs, not only during a crisis, but in everyday interactions."

— Pedro Garcia
Superintendent, Corona-Norco USD

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ROLE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

When law enforcement arrives at the scene of a crisis, they have three distinct priorities:

- Locate, isolate and neutralize the threat.
- Assist in providing information to the media at regular intervals.
- Assist in finding a location where the media can work.

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- Knowing and understanding law enforcement's role during a crisis can assist school officials in working with the media and disseminating accurate, timely information to the community and parents about the crisis. Using law enforcement to assist the designated school representative with media communication can relieve some of the pressure on school officials.

- Law enforcement agencies deal with crises regularly. They are the trained professionals equipped to handle the situation. Law enforcement officials should be informed, and help answer questions about the crisis.

- Knowing your local law enforcement officials and how they respond to a crisis will pay dividends. Periodic meetings with fire, police and sheriff's department and media representatives are highly recommended. The more familiar law enforcement and reporters are with you and your school district's plans in advance, the less confusion you'll have during the crisis.

- The designated school representative should be prepared to provide law enforcement student information and background on the school district.

KEY THOUGHTS: Crises can take a long time to conclude. Law enforcement may take days to complete their work and news media will often report aftermath and community healing stories long after the crisis has ended. Having background information on the school, such as when the school was built and how many students attend, can help assist reporters with follow-up stories.

"Through partnering with our local media and law enforcement on issues of crisis planning, we realize just how much we're on the same side."

— Dan Walden
CSBA President-elect
Board Member, Walnut Creek SD

Resource Information List

California School Boards Association
800.266.3382
www.csba.org

California School Public Relations Association
(CalSPRA)
Contact: Sharon Rallo 888.670.2731

National School Public Relations Association
(NSPRA)
301.519.0496
www.nspra.org

Federal Emergency Management Agency
(FEMA)
202.646.4600
www.fema.gov

California Governor's Office of Emergency Services
(OES)
916.262.1843
www.oes.ca.gov

National School Safety Center
(NSSC)
805.373.9977
www.nssc1.org

NorCal Radio and Television News Directors Association
650.341.9978
rcrtnda@aol.com

Office of the Attorney General Crime and Violence Prevention Center
916.327.2384
www.caag.state.ca.us

Radio and Television News Association of Southern California
818.986.8168
www.rtnda.org

Radio-Television News Directors Association & Foundation
202.659.6510
www.RTNDA.COM/CONTACT/us.shtml

The Society of Professional Journalists
317.927.8000
www.spj.org

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Local police department contact:
Name _____
Phone _____

Local sheriff's department contact:
Name _____
Phone _____

Local television station contact:
Name _____
Phone _____

Local radio station contact:
Name _____
Phone _____

Local newspaper reporter contact:
Name _____
Phone _____

Local newspaper editor contact:
Name _____
Phone _____

Crisis Communications Planning Checklist

**Local law enforcement and media representatives should be included in the crisis communications planning process.

- ❒ Establish a crisis communications policy
- ❒ Identify a school spokesperson (who will speak to the media?)
  - ❒ Provide spokesperson training
- ❒ Create a crisis communications plan
  - ❒ Identify crisis communications "team"
    - ❒ Internal notification system
    - ❒ External notification system
    - ❒ Location of "command post"
    - ❒ Identify media center location and alternate location
    - ❒ Identify press conference logistics
      - ❒ Technical requirements for large-scale media activity
  - ❒ Pre-written materials
    - ❒ School history
    - ❒ Basic school information kit
    - ❒ Key personnel background/bios
  - ❒ Emergency radio agreements
    - ❒ Public instructions
    - ❒ Key personnel contact information
- ❒ Periodic review of emergency plan
- ❒ Periodic review of contact names and phone numbers
  - ❒ Periodic review of 24-hour contact

"Our commitment must be to believe in the good will of each and cooperate for the benefit of all."

— Steve Farrar
Superintendent, Lincoln USD

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CSBA President-elect
Board Member,
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CSBA Delegate, Region 6
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